

The Bush Message to Vilnius: Talk

For days, Administration officials have been floating stories suggesting that the United States would impose sanctions against the Soviet crackdown in Lithuania. Yesterday President Bush did the right thing — nothing. And he chose to do it at the right time.

Mikhail Gorbachev has now made clear that he is asking Lithuanian leaders to suspend their declaration of independence, not to withdraw it, and to proceed toward expedited independence based on the Soviet Constitution. That represents a fair basis for talks between Moscow and Vilnius and it deserves support, not sanctions, from the West.

Dialogue is what Mr. Bush has been urging for weeks. And to those who had been pressing him to hit Moscow with economic sanctions, he responded: "I am concerned that we not do anything that would cause the Soviet Union to take action that would set back the cause of freedom around the world."

It may be hard to get the full impact of this message across to the Lithuanians. As long as some leaders in Vilnius think they can establish their independence instantly by precipitating a world crisis, there's little incentive for them to settle even for reasonable dialogue.

The Lithuanian people are already feeling the bite of Moscow's oil and natural gas squeeze. But some Lithuanian leaders may have calculated that the Soviet embargo would compel the West to retaliate, even at the risk of a crisis, forcing the West to rush to their side. These leaders would have been encouraged by the recent reports implying that Mr. Bush was about to suspend Soviet-American trade and commercial talks.

The mystery is whether Mr. Bush or any of his top aides ever really contemplated such a step, and if so, why. Polls show Americans do not want to sacrifice support for Mr. Gorbachev's reforms in order to press for immediate Lithuanian independence. Almost all European leaders and influential members of Congress feel the same way.

Instant independence for a "captive nation" is a seductive but oversimplified cause. President Bush has wisely and consistently resisted it. He has urged Moscow to move along toward Lithuanian independence — and Mr. Gorbachev has been doing that. Now Mr. Bush is sending the Lithuanians two signals as gracefully as he can: The United States won't precipitate an East-West crisis over Lithuania. The time has come to talk to Moscow.